

Asia Literacy and the National Goals for Schooling:

A letter from the Asia Education Foundation to Professor Peter Dawkins

Dear Professor Dawkins

Re: Australian National Goals for Schooling

I write on behalf of the Asia Education Foundation (AEF)¹ in response to your call for consultation on the draft National Goals for Schooling in Australia.

School education stakeholders recognize that the world has changed significantly since 1999 when we last set national goals for schooling.

I draw your attention to the recent Call to Action: Asia literacy for every young Australian, an initiative of the AEF Advisory Board and endorsed by twenty-four peak education bodies. This alliance specifically calls for “the National Goals for Schooling to state the necessity to equip every young Australian with Asia skills and knowledge.”

The key defining global development over this past decade has been the emergence of Asia as the economic powerhouse of the twenty-first century, signaling significant shifts in Australia’s strategic and trade alliances. The National Goals for Schooling must recognize this reality if Australia is to equip its young people to thrive and prosper in our world today.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has said that the core challenge for Australia is how we best prepare ourselves for the Asian Century – to maximize the opportunities, minimize the threats and make our own active contribution to making the Asian Century peaceful, prosperous and sustainable for us all. In fact the PM has stated that he “wants Australia to become the most Asialiterate country in the western world.”

If this is to occur it is essential that our National Goals for Schooling include in their aspiration and intentions that for young Australians to comprehend their world and be active and informed citizens in local, national, regional and global contexts, they need to develop a sound understanding of Asian countries, cultures and languages. A goal such as the following would be appropriate:

“That, when they leave school, students will have, within a significant international orientation, particular knowledge, understanding and appreciation of our Asian region and its engagement with Australia, as well as inter-cultural and language skills to engage successfully with Asian peoples and enterprises.”

Australia’s Changing World: 1999-2008

Realities that have emerged over the past decade to shape Australia, and Australia’s place in the world, include:

- our major trading partners are China, Japan, the US and Korea with India growing rapidly. Australia’s trade with China jumped a staggering 25% between 2006 and 2007 alone - moving China into number one position
- China and India are Australia’s largest and fastest growing source of tourists and international students
- China and India are set to be the world’s top economies by 2040 when five year- olds starting school in Australia today will be at the peak of their working lives

- by 2020 the Asian region will make up 40% of the world's population with half of those under 25 years-of-age. They are our children's contemporaries: their future business partners, workmates, bosses, customers, clients and, if we play our social cohesion and security cards right, their friends
- Australian business recognizes that to remain globally competitive and leverage strategic opportunities beyond the resources boom, will require well developed knowledge about the countries and cultures of Asia plus intercultural and languages skills
- pressing global issues confront Australians including climate change, energy and food supply, pandemics and security. We need to have the skills to work closely with our geographic neighbours in Asia to help resolve these global issues
- close to 10% of Australians are from Asian backgrounds and this is rising. The 2006 Census indicated that 800,000 Australians speak an Asian language at home; Buddhism is Australia's fastest growing religion; our third largest source of migrants are Indian and over 20% of our university students are Asian
- our creative and cultural life is enriched by the civilizations and contemporary cultural dynamism of Asia; to contribute to the social capital of our nation all young Australians, including those from an Asian background, need to gain a sense from their schooling that they are contributing to what it means to be Australian today
- countries around the world are currently redefining their curriculum to respond to the pressing demands of globalization. Many western countries are redressing their omission of Asia skills and knowledge in school curricula that have focused solely on western learning and traditions. To remain competitive, Australia must address this too.

In summary, Asia competencies are required for every young Australian to:

- boost productivity through working with the world's largest economies
- collaborate with our neighbours in Asia to resolve global issues
- strengthen our social capital through understanding

Australia's Response

The Australian community's capacity to engage with the Asian region presents a sizable challenge because of the traditional dominance of a Western education and continuing cultural influences of America and Europe. Australian curriculum content reflects this and remains largely Euro-centric:

- no education system explicitly requires schools to teach about the Asian region; data indicates that 50% of our schools are not equipped to teach about Asia
- less than 25% of our students have the opportunity to study an Asian language; only 5.8% of Year 12 students choose to study an Asian language - this decreases to 3% at University
- the majority of our teachers have had no opportunity to learn about Asia in their own education; there is no plan to ensure the Asia literacy of new teachers
- no education system monitors student learning about Asia.

Attributes Required by Australia's 18 Year-Olds

In the twenty-first century our young people require understandings and skills necessary to be effective local and global participants and they require particular knowledge, understandings and skills to be effective regional participants and citizens. In other words, they need to become Asia-literate.

Achieving an Asia-literate Australia must be a core goal of Australian schooling. We have the capacity and structures in place in present curriculum to embed studies of Asia as a core element for every student - especially in Humanities and Social Sciences, English and The Arts.

We must plan to increase the cohort of students who study an Asian language and we need to connect our young people to their peers in Asia through initiatives that promote people-to-people links including utilising modern communications technologies.

A broad reference in the National Goals for Schooling to the need for 'inter-cultural understanding' will not be adequate.

Neither will reference to the need for schooling to 'respond to globalization' where students might, randomly, study any part of the world and miss Asia altogether.

Australia requires that our National Goals explicitly state that young Australians develop a sound understanding of Asia. If this is not explicit, achieving Asia literacy will be left to the discretion of individual teachers and schools as it has done to date.

If we don't have Asia-literacy in the National Goals and don't report against it, it won't happen in a widespread and effective way in schools. This will disadvantage those students who do not have access to develop Asia competencies and will contribute to a new divide in Australia.

Specific attributes required by Australian school leavers include the ability to:

- appreciate the importance of Asia to Australia's future and their own future
- know the overall geography of the Asian region and understand its diversity
- know about particular episodes, events and issues in the history of the Asian region that help explain why the region and its countries are as they are, and how they have made significant contributions to world development and knowledge
- be aware of the major economic and environmental developments in Asia
- understand Asian cultures, values, ways of life and spirituality
- have the skills to empathise and engage with people of Asian background, both within Australia and in the wider world
- have familiarity with significant Asian texts, including contemporary youth texts
- be able to use Asian languages to understand, and communicate with, Asian people
- be able to engage creatively and critically with Asian artistic cultures and popular technologies.

The changes required in Australia's school education to achieve Asia literacy are considerable and the challenges these changes pose to effective implementation will require explicit and concerted effort and monitoring. The AEF would welcome the opportunity to provide a briefing to the COAG Productivity Working Group on this.

As schooling aims to equip our young people for their future, new Australian National Goals for Schooling cannot ignore Asia literacy.

Thank you for your consideration of this contribution.

Yours sincerely

Kathe Kirby
Executive Director
Asia Education Foundation
15 August 2008